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ON&OFF FARM

Food hub cooks up storm in north-west

The food hub is one of the most exciting community based projects that I have visited over the past number of years. Based in Drumshambo, Co Leitrim, an old jam factory has been transformed into 14 individual food business units for lease. It is set to become a hotbed for the current food revolution under way in the area

KEYPOINTS

- Food hub – great community project
- Low cost option for small businesses
- Community kitchen, huge innovation
- Model others need to look at

Local demand growing strongly

OVER the last few years there has been a huge increase in the number of farmers and rural people trying to develop good food production businesses. A swing back to local produce means that demand is there. Farmers' markets have fuelled the interest and given people the courage to start selling their own produce directly.

Many producers simply start by making products in their own kitchen. Success however, brings its own problems.

BARRIER

Investment in a purpose-built production facility can be a huge barrier to entry for interested parties wishing to set up on their own. It's a hurdle which many fail to cross. The food hub is set to bridge that gap. It offers facilities for food producing enthusiasts, who do not have

the capital to invest in the development of their own food business. As the name suggests, the food hub offers more than just a state of the art facility, it is in fact a hub; combining a host of different amenities and services to include training, an on site food technologist business consultants, a fully equipped community kitchen and a farmers market showcase. The success of the food hub will be closely followed in the next few years. Already, groups of interested food enthusiasts have flocked to the area to see the food hub in all its glory. Their passion for food excellence manifests itself in a burning desire to replicate all which the food hub has to offer.

I have no doubt that it is already becoming the blueprint of success for other food producing facilities around the country.



The food hub based in Drumshambo, Co Leitrim, is set to become a hotbed for the current food revolution under way in the area.



Noel McPartland, the main visionary behind the Food Hub.



Louise, Food Technologist and Fergal McPartland, The Food Hub.

Getting themselves out of a jam

DRUMSHAMBO has seen industries come and go in the last 50 years. From the famous Arigna mines closure in the summer of 1990, the area was still reeling from the demise of the well known Lairds Jam business, which closed in late 1980s.

The premises where the food hub is situated was first built to expand the production of Lairds Jam. These jams were famous and sold across the world, particularly in the Middle East. When fortunes turned, the company was sold first to Larry Goodman, who then sold it on to the Kepak Group. The com-

pany's closure in 1998 meant the loss of 100 jobs in the community. The 32,000 sq ft factory lay idle for over six years.

EFFORT

A huge amount of community effort and resources were put into the food hub.

However, everyone agrees that it would not have happened, but for one man, Noel McPartland. Noel, worked in the Lairds Jam factory for 25 years. He witnessed good times as well as bad times, particularly when the factory closed down. From that day, Noel always had a vision for

the factory. Despite a number of failed attempts to get it up and running, his persistence eventually paid off. After finding a buyer for the old factory, the deal gave the community a 99-year lease on the factory. Years of research, planning and funding applications, saw a massive €1.7m raised to get the project to completion.

There is a long list of key financial stake holders involved in the project whose generosity and commitment deserve particular mention; Arigna Leader, National Development Plan, European Union and Structural Funds,

International fund for Ireland, EU programme for Peace and reconciliation, Department of Rural Community and Gaeltacht Affairs - Clar, Enterprise Ireland, Leitrim County Council Peace II Task Force, The Green Box, Leitrim County Enterprise Board, Epicurean Food Centre, Interreg IIIA Programme Priority 1 Measure.

For Noel McPartland, and others in the Drumshambo Community Council who have done the work voluntarily, this project has been a voyage and a labour of love that has already started to bear fruit.